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# *Lyudmila Alexeyeva, 'Grandmother' of Russia's Human Rights Movement, Dies at 91*

By Andrew E. Kramer

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Lyudmila M. Alexeyeva, a leader of the Russian human rights movement in the Soviet Union and in the era of President Vladimir V. Putin, died on Saturday in a Moscow hospital. She was 91.

Her death was confirmed to the Russian news media by Mikhail Fedotov, the director of the presidential human rights council.

Ms. Alexeyeva had been Russia's most prominent surviving Soviet-era dissident, harking from the same generation as the physicist Andrei Sakharov and the novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Though frail, she took part in street protests until about eight years ago.

She spent about 50 years in the Russian opposition, starting as a typist for a samizdat journal in the 1960s and continuing as an observer of politicized court hearings against street protesters under Mr. Putin.

"She was clearly one of the giants," Tanya Lokshina, an associate director for Europe and Central Asia at Human Rights Watch, said in a telephone interview. "She called herself the grandmother of the Russian human rights movement, and that is what she was."

Ms. Alexeyeva was a co-founder of the Moscow Helsinki Group, a pioneering human rights organization, for which the Soviet authorities exiled her from the country. She then served as the organization's chairwoman after returning to Russia in the post-Soviet period.



President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia visiting Ms. Alexeyeva on her 90th birthday at her Moscow home last year. Pool photo by Alexei Nikolsky

Though she spent a lifetime challenging abusive leaders, her approach was never shrill, acquaintances said. Also, she saved some of her criticism not for the abusive men in power, but the people who let them get away with it.

In her analysis of the causes of repression in her society, Ms. Alexeyeva consistently disputed any neat apposition of Russian despots and Western democratic leaders. Russia was not merely unlucky with its leaders, she maintained.

What separated the Soviet Union and Russia from the West, she said, were not enlightened leaders but systems of checks and balances. With the Helsinki Group, for example, she tried to monitor the authorities in the Soviet Union by holding them to their own stated commitments to human rights.

Her views were also a critique of the vilification of Mr. Putin as personally responsible for rolling back Russian democracy and the idea, sometimes heard among his opponents, that if he were to step down Russia might be ruled differently. Only by building civil society could Russians achieve better results from their leaders, she maintained.

“She kept pushing that point,” Ms. Lokshina of Human Rights Watch said. “There could be different leaders, but if there is a healthy system of checks and balances, it is much more difficult to do serious damage. Unfortunately, in Russia, that is not the case.”

She is survived by two sons, five grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

Born in Crimea on July 20, 1927, Ms. Alexeyeva became a dissident as a member of what she called the “thaw generation” under the Soviet leader Nikita S. Khrushchev, who introduced a period of relaxed censorship.

When the screws tightened again in Leonid Brezhnev’s Soviet Union, she and other Moscow intellectuals risked their lives to keep pressing for freedom and human rights. Ms. Alexeyeva typed a samizdat journal, called the Chronicle of Current Events.

She and other dissidents saw an opening when the Soviet Union signed a treaty in Helsinki that required it to uphold certain rights at home, though apparently it had little intention of doing so. In 1976, she co-founded the Helsinki Group to monitor compliance.

Ms. Alexeyeva arriving at a New Year’s Eve anti-Kremlin protest in downtown Moscow in 2009. Ivan Sekretarev/Associated Press

Though the treaty’s text was published in Pravda, the newspaper of the Communist Party, the Soviet authorities were not amused. They broke up the Helsinki group less than a year after its founding, and offered Ms. Alexeyeva a choice of prison or exile.

Her husband pressed her to take the second option, and she left with her family for the United States, not returning until 16 years later, after the Soviet breakup. In the United States, she wrote two books: “The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era” and a scholarly study

## called "Soviet Dissent."

When Mr. Putin came to power in 1999, Ms. Alexeyeva quickly became critical of his government and, in particular, rights abuses by Russian soldiers during the second war in Chechnya. Despite this, she engaged with Mr. Putin's government and is credited with persuading him to shelve a plan to force people who had fled the war in Chechnya to return before the fighting had stopped.

As Mr. Putin rolled back democratic rights, Ms. Alexeyeva lent her name to a range of causes, including a protest group that gathered on the 31st day of months with 31 days, in reference to the 31st article of the Russian constitution guaranteeing freedom of assembly. It was at one such protest that she was arrested in 2010.

Still, she remained optimistic about Russia's prospects, telling interviewers that, as bad as conditions were under Mr. Putin, the Soviet Union had been worse: "When people say to me, 'It is like Soviet times,' I say, 'No, it is much, much better. It is moving slowly, slowly, but in the right direction.'"

If the government's aim was to stage show trials to discourage street protests, she said in 2012, it would backfire in the looser society of post-Soviet Russia. "It is not working," she said. "They have to reckon with the fact that people are not afraid. This is the 21st century, not the Soviet Union."

But the soft authoritarianism under Mr. Putin also took its toll. After Russia passed a law restricting foreign funding for nongovernmental organizations, Ms. Alexeyeva was compelled to lay off employees at the Helsinki Group.

Nonetheless, Mr. Putin paid a visit to Ms. Alexeyeva on her 90th birthday that was both a gesture of respect and, apparently, a sly effort to co-opt support from Russia's most prominent dissident for the annexation of Crimea. Mr. Putin, as a gift, offered Ms. Alexeyeva a painting of her native Crimea. She accepted.

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